



A STUDY ON THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND RECONCILIATION AMONG LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITIES IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

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This study aims to examine the intricate yet crucial relationship between identity, belonging, and reconciliation within diverse societal contexts, offering insights into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities in Sri Lanka. It strives for an inclusive, multidisciplinary approach that combines social, cultural, legal, and LGBTQIA+ studies to understand the unique challenges faced by individuals in this community. This research investigates how the LGBTQIA+ communities negotiate the complex process of identity and belonging within the larger social fold, considering shades pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity, among other intersectional factors. The study researched societal attitudes, discrimination, and legal frameworks affecting the self-identities and sense of belonging among LGBTQIA+ individuals in Sri Lanka, with a specific orientation toward the promotion of reconciliation among different communities. The qualitative research methodology incorporates in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations in an attempt to capture the breadth of experiences within the LGBTQIA+ communities. Findings from this study have serious practical implications for LGBTQIA+ activists, educators, policymakers, and others who are interested in this kind of progressive reconciliation in diverse societal contexts. This research aims to shed light on the complex relationship between identity, belonging, and reconciliation, contributing to the development of strategies and interventions that promote increased understanding, reduced societal divisions, and the creation of an inclusive, reconciled society. This would also add to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for reconciliation within LGBTQIA+ communities concerning the incorporation necessary for effectively connecting marginalized groups with society at large.

Keywords: belonging, identity, LGBTQIA+, post-war, reconciliation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to contribute to what is most under-researched as expressions of identity, belonging, and reconciliation in the evolving polity and structure of post-conflict Sri Lanka, and to focus on the LGBTQIA+ communities. The Sri Lankan government has struggled to balance the process of rebuilding a war-torn nation with addressing issues of recognition and belonging for all its communities. "Belonging" and "homeland" are viewed as tenable concepts and experiences crucially shaped through intricate and variegated processes of recognition and misrecognition. With the end of civil war in 2009, local, regional, and international power dynamics and intricacies surrounding reconciliation, recognition, and belonging remain to be uncovered, understood and questioned because there is a considerable body of work on identity, belonging, and reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka, but much of it predominantly focuses on ethnic, religious, and territorial conflicts (Uyangoda 2010, Fonseka & Raheem 2011). The tensions and disjuncture between the different forms of "belonging" in post-war Sri Lanka, especially in relation to individuals and groups with non-dominant forms of ethnic identity, sexuality, and gender, remain unexplored (Wijayath, 2018). The main research question is, "How do the LGBTQIA+ communities navigate the intersections of identity, belonging, and reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka?" This study explores how post-war conditions in Sri Lanka affect LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences of identity, belonging, and reconciliation. It examines legal and societal barriers, analyses their impact on reconciliation processes, and contributes new perspectives to academic literature on marginalized communities in post-war societies.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with LGBTQIA+ individuals from Colombo, Galle, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via the Equite network. Interviews were conducted ethically with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using ATLAS.ti through inductive and deductive coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Theme of Sexual Identity Formation

Qualitative analysis of the data regarding the research topic revealed several important findings. LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences, aspirations, and struggles are presented to highlight the main themes of identity and belonging in the reconciliation process.

One recurring theme that emerged from the interviews and focus groups was sexual identity formation. Participants mentioned the validation found in representation and the safety within the labels for which that representation gave meaning, through which to counter their identities' fluid nature.

As one 27 years old gay male participant expressed,

"Before I found people like me, I didn't even know that what I felt had a name. The label gave me a feeling of security; it helped me make sense of myself" (Participant 3, Interview 3, 7th June 2024, Colombo).

The labels offered contrast against the fluid and Conta directory of sexual identity, offering the benefit of feeling belonging to an existing community. This is what was found previously, which focused on how labelling solidifies identities in the sense of offering constancy and the experience of being legitimized (Diamond, 2002).

However, not all participants were fully comfortable with the rigid boundaries that these labels showed. The tension among and within LGBTQIA+ groups, which arises from seeking label safety, while, at the same time, wishing to retain fluid sexual identities. This duality, where labels give both clarifying information that and constriction, exemplifies the intricate dynamics of sexual identity construction in Sri Lanka.

3.2 Barriers Faced by the LGBTQIA+ communities

Social stigma remains extensive, with LGBTQIA+ individuals encountering discrimination in various domains such as employment, education, and healthcare. A 23-year-old transgender man shared his experience of discrimination in the job market,

"I tried to get a job, but every time I applied, they asked too many personal questions about my body. People don't see us for our skills; they see us as different and unwanted" (Participant 9, Interview 9, 10th July 2024, Galle).

This type of discrimination often stems from rigid cultural norms that reflect heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, which marginalize LGBTQIA+ individuals. A gay male participant reflected,

"In this society, if you don't fit into the traditional family structure, you're outcast. It's that simple. You don't belong anywhere" (Participant 5, Focus Group 3, 28th July 2024, Batticaloa).

These statements show the general views in society that are pushing LGBTQIA+ individuals to navigate in a world in which they are always made to feel like outsiders. Transgender individuals, in particular, are burdened with searching for viable options for gender-affirming care within Sri Lanka, where no broad healthcare policy has yet



promoted a total response to the needs of its gender-diverse constituents (Wijayath, 2018). This unwillingness on the part of medical professionals to give the community holistic care leads to widening the gaps through which the community dips further into invisibility and denies them the access to healthcare services.

3.3 Impact of Legal Frameworks and Social Attitudes

The legal framework in Sri Lanka plays a significant role in enabling the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Although these laws are rarely enforced, their very presence legitimizes violence and discrimination and perpetuates a situation where LGBTQIA+ citizens are second-class citizens (Ariyaratne, 2022). The constant need to mask one's identity contributes to an extensive sense of isolation and psychological distress. A transgender woman said that, "The law makes us feel that we are criminals because of whom we are, our identity. It is as if they say that we do not belong here" (Participant 1, Interview 1, 7th June 2024, Colombo).

This discrimination in the law has a feeling of exclusion and disenfranchisement, and most LGBTQIA+ individuals end up thinking that they do not belong to the society in which they live. The absence of legal protection for same-sex relationships further aggravates the suffering of LGBTQIA+ individuals. As LGBTQIA+ couples are not protected under the law, they are denied basic rights such as inheritance, medical consent, and paternity/maternity rights. This failure to recognize afflicts not only LGBTQIA+ relationships but also places the victims in compromising positions where their family relationships are not validated by the state (Ariyaratne, 2022).

3.4 Social and Cultural Impacts

The Sri Lankan cultural setting also presents extra challenges to LGBTQIA+ individuals, as cultural expectations at times require them to conceal their identities to avoid social exclusion.

Concealment, however, undetermined authentic interaction, and results in feelings of loneliness. The confinement will make them alone and lonely with anxiety and depression that escalate because of the lack of havens where the LGBTQIA+ can freely identify who they are without fear (Ariyaratne, 2022). Evidence-based minority stress theory demonstrates the ways in which constant stress resulting from identity hiding can be psychologically harmful and lead to decreased self-esteem and belonging (Diamond, 2002).

Many participants who joined the focus group discussions were in a deeply painful struggle due to the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity. One transgender participant voiced this tension as,

"I want to believe, I want to pray, but my religion is telling me I am a sin. It's hard to reconcile that" (Participant 4, Focus Group 6, 3rd August 2024, Trincomalee).

This tension is exacerbated by religious institutions that promote heteronormative values and discourage discussion of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Many LGBTQIA+



people experience spiritual trauma, in which religious teaching is a basis for guilt, shame, and self-rejection (Somasundaram, 2007). Some are afraid of excommunication or rejection from their faith communities, so they drift away from their religious faith, exacerbating their sense of isolation.

3.5 Intersection of Identity, Belonging, and Reconciliation

The intersection of identity, belonging, and reconciliation within the LGBTQIA+ communities in Sri Lanka throws back the broader socio-political and historical landscape. LGBTQIA+ individuals must navigate a complex ground shaped by war, colonization, and confirmed social norms. As one participant summarized, "Our fight isn't just about being gay or transgender. It's about challenging a system that has oppressed us for generations" (Participant 14, Interview 14, 5th August 2024, Batticaloa).

One of the central themes in the debate on LGBTQIA+ identity in Sri Lanka is label security. For most of the participants, labels such as "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," or "transgender" give them a sense of clarity and stability regarding understanding and explaining their identities. These labels give people a means of making sense of their experiences, particularly when attempting to be part of the broader LGBTQIA+ community. The strict application of labels sometimes coexists with challenges, especially for people considering their lives through an identity which does not fit well into any predefined category.

Belonging, as a psychological and social need, is closely linked with both personal identity and the collective experiences of marginalized communities. For many, the process of identity formation is intricately linked to their search for belonging within their immediate social circles, the broader LGBTQIA+ community, and even within the nation-state itself. True reconciliation will require open dialogue between LGBTQIA+ individuals and the wider society, including religious institutions, to foster a more inclusive environment.

4. CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative research into the intersection of identity, belonging, and reconciliation focuses on LGBTQIA+ communities in post-war Sri Lanka and brings deep insight into the multi-layered realities individual representatives of these communities have to face. The research highlights the various legal and social obstacles faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Sri Lanka after the war. The concealment contributes to a severe psychological stress condition and can result in social isolation, further inflaming the mental health issues among people of these communities. Regarding the social and cultural influences on the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the study pays great attention to how cultural imperatives almost always force individuals into concealing their sexual identities. The socio-political, cultural, and religious dimensions intertwined in the discourses of identity, belonging, and reconciliation create a complex pattern of intersectionality in the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals in post-war Sri Lanka. This calls for a multi-layered approach to



understanding and working toward the needs of LGBTQIA+ communities. Further, longitudinal studies are needed which can trace the development of identity and reconciliation processes over time for an in-depth understanding of how these experiences shape the lives of individuals.

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